

Appendix 7

Comments from 2002 Veterans Satisfaction Survey

The Job Ready Phase

An Analysis of Verbatims from the 2002 Survey of Veterans Satisfaction with the VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program

Surveys and Research Staff
VBA Office of Performance Analysis and Integrity
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Introduction

This report presents the results of a content analysis of the written comments, or “verbatim,” from the “2002 Survey of Veterans Satisfaction with the VA Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Program, Job Ready Phase.” In every survey that the Surveys and Research staff conducts, respondents are given the option of writing in additional comments on the last page of the questionnaire on ways to improve service, or to give more detail about a specific personal experience. Since generally people are only willing to provide more detail on areas that they feel are *very* important to their satisfaction with the program, these verbatims provide extremely helpful insights into the best ways to achieve higher veteran satisfaction with service. This report will outline the major issues that were mentioned by the veterans in the job ready phase and will also provide a sampling of the comments for each issue.

Methodology

In previous survey administrations the verbatims were bundled with the survey reports and given to the program for review. However, since the VR&E survey was conducted at only the National level in 2002, the Surveys and Research Staff retained the verbatims from all three phases of the survey (Evaluation and Planning, Rehabilitation, and Job Ready) in order to do an in-depth analysis and provide a summary to the VR&E service. The survey was sent in December 2002 to the total population of 8,147 veterans who were in the job ready phase or who had been deemed rehabilitated within the previous four months. A total of 3,885 respondents completed the questionnaire for a response rate of 53.0 percent. Of these 3,885 respondents, 54.3 percent or 2,111 veterans submitted verbatims.

The 2,111 verbatims were reviewed and sorted into nine categories. A significant percentage (17.9 percent) of the veterans wrote about more than one issue, therefore the percentages that follow will total over 100 percent.

Overview

Of the 2,111 veterans who provided comments at the end of the questionnaire, almost a third (30.6 percent) wrote in to compliment the VR&E program. Almost one-fourth (23.9 percent) of the respondents who submitted comments wrote to complain about their counselors; and 23.5 percent of respondents wrote in to request that there be

more help with the job search phase of the program. Additionally, 17.9 percent of the respondents wrote in to suggest changes to the program regulations or an increase in benefits, and 9.6 percent remarked on their dissatisfaction with their career choice and/or rehabilitation plan.

Roughly five percent or less of the respondents mentioned other issues such as delays in receiving benefits, not receiving enough information about the program, school problems, or miscellaneous issues that could not be easily categorized. Due to the small number of comments in these categories, they will not be covered in this report.

Complimentary Remarks

Almost a third of the veterans submitting comments (30.6 percent) wrote in to compliment the program, with 457 veterans writing in only positive remarks, and another 190 including a compliment about a certain aspect of the program along with complaints about other aspects. Many were very pleased with the tuition assistance that enabled them to attend school, and many of the positive comments were directed at counselors who exceeded the veteran's expectations. The following are a sampling of the verbatims that complimented the program for outstanding service:

"This is a very, very good program! My needs were met very quickly. There are a lot of good people working for the veterans and this program shows it."

"Ever since being involved with the VA in any capacity, I have been 100% satisfied and treated with the greatest respect possible. Everyone I've been in contact with were kind, passionate, respectful, and went way beyond the call of duty."

"My counselor was a virtual Godsend. She was attentive, conscientious, caring, and personable -always going that extra mile to make sure I received everything I needed to succeed in the program. Thanks to her, I now have a promising career and I know I couldn't have done it without her! Thanks for the opportunity to comment on this wonderful, worthwhile program!"

"The program helped put me where I'm at now - owner of my own business. The counselor gave me good advice and was there when I needed him."

Specific Job Ready Phase Issues

Problems with Counselor

Overall, 23.9 percent of the respondents who submitted verbatims mentioned having problems with their counselor, with 314 respondents writing in with this issue as their only complaint and an additional 192 respondents mentioning it as one of several issues. Several specific aspects of counselor interaction were criticized, but the two most frequently mentioned issues were rudeness/lack of understanding and difficulty maintaining an adequate amount of contact. A common request was to have counselors who are sympathetic to the hardships disabled veterans face and who are actively

interested in their well-being. Many felt as if they were just another case file and that the counselor did not have sufficient time or motivation to understand their individual situation. Many also expressed concern at the caseloads of the counselors, feeling that they were too overworked to be really effective. It was clear from these comments that the veteran's relationship with the counselor has tremendous influence on their satisfaction with the program, as so many of the benefits and services provided by the program are at the discretion of the counselors. The following are a sampling of the comments:

"Please don't treat veterans like they are just a number. I personally feel like this program will work with tremendous results if and only if the counselors truly put their hearts and minds into the program as well. It has been my unfortunate experience, that most of the VA representatives and counselors, of whom most are prior veterans, have an 'I don't care' attitude."

"I feel the VA should use a person with a military background who genuinely cares about a veteran in that very important position. I feel that my VA counselor did not. She said the program was a 'welfare program' and she felt it was not fair for veterans to receive the benefits over any one else."

"The program is striving to take care of veterans but it is in need of more counselors. [It takes] too long to meet and see them. Hours need to be changed to maybe one late night a week or every couple of weeks to meet with those who do work or have to travel great distances."

"The VA and its representatives need to be more easily accessible. It has taken me 3 to 4 months of repeated phone calls (on a weekly basis) to get a hold of my counselors at the VA. They never return calls and are very unresponsive."

Job Search

Another major area of concern to veterans was the job search. Almost one-fourth (23.5 percent) of those submitting comments wrote in to request there be more help with job hunting, with 332 veterans writing in solely about this issue and 164 mentioning it as one of several issues. A common multiple issue verbatim was one that praised almost every other aspect of the program such as the training and subsistence provided, but criticized the lack of help in the final phase. Many expressed surprise at being sent out on their own to find a job after having received so much support and guidance from their counselor throughout their schooling. Many also felt it was unfair to expect disabled veterans to be able to compete in the general job market and requested that VA set up a network of disabled veteran-friendly employers. The following are a sampling of the comments:

"The person who knew about the job I ended up with wasn't a Voc Rehab counselor but in some other job in the office there. That was good but it seemed almost accidental. I feel like that kind of in-office networking should be a regular part of what happens."

"After school I have tried several times to obtain help with job placement and have yet to receive any real help. The VA spent a lot of time and money sending me to school. I feel it would help round out the program if they would work with me on job placement. I am still doing the same job as I was when I went to school. Kind of a waste for both of us."

"I feel that VA could improve the program by requiring students to do an internship with a government official or VA office so they can enhance their skills. The only problem I had with the program is that every job I applied for told me that my degree was good, but I need more experience. I had to take a job with an employer that doesn't help my skills in my field."

"I think that developing a job network for disabled veterans would be excellent. This network should include employers, job description, waiver of age limits to enter Federal jobs and help networks."

Program Regulations and Benefits

A slightly smaller percentage of the respondents (17.9 percent) wrote in to suggest changes to the program regulations or increases in the subsistence allowance. Of this 17.9 percent, 295 veterans commented only on program changes and an additional 84 made suggestions after commenting on other issues. The most often-mentioned suggestions were for increases in funds for subsistence and school supplies, and an increase in the amount of schooling allowed. Many veterans indicated that they were the sole wage earner for their family and complained about the difficulty of supporting the family on the subsistence payments while in training. Others suggested more flexibility in allowing them to continue their education past the minimum required for their field, due to the difficult job market. A common complaint was that the program would not approve more than a two-year degree, which they felt was unrealistic in today's job market for most careers. The following are a sampling of the comments:

"The program would be better if computer equipment and supplies were added. It's hard to learn to program computers if you don't have the software or equipment."

"The program needs to be updated with the times to provide more, although tuition was paid, the monthly allowance was \$400 less than the GI Bill. If the program is designed to provide disabled veterans with the additional assistance they need, and the veteran has paid into the GI Bill, why must he or she forgo one for the other? I had to take on another job to cover my monthly bills. Also, a degree alone does not make one competitive in today's job market. The program needs to include business licenses and certification courses."

"I recommend allowing veterans with a high degree of drive, who require less than 48 months of training/education, to pursue graduate degrees. Make us into good tax payers."

"Please include a program that allows veterans to sustain part-time employment while going through the VR&E program. The monthly subsistence isn't enough to live off while going through training. I think your completion rate will go up. Combine going to school with part-time employment at a Federal agency."

"The subsistence allowance is very small to support my family during my rehabilitation. It is kind of difficult for me to buy my books and supplies from my own money and then get reimbursed at a later date, because reimbursement takes a long time and I don't have enough money to advance for my supplies."

Career Choice/Rehabilitation Plan

Another 9.6 percent of the respondents submitting verbatims wrote about their dissatisfaction with the rehabilitation plan and career chosen for them, with 146 veterans writing only about this issue and 56 including it as one of several issues. Although a relatively low percentage wrote about this issue, it should still be cause for concern since the veteran's rehabilitation plan is the foundation of the entire program. A common complaint was the lack of choices given to the veteran when deciding on a career path, and in some cases the total lack of concern for accommodating their disability. Some veterans felt pushed into certain areas that were currently good job markets (e.g., information technology), despite having no interest or aptitude in the field. Many also complained that the counselor was simply not knowledgeable regarding employment markets and thus could not effectively counsel them on what career goal to pursue. Another issue mentioned repeatedly was not being allowed sufficient schooling to meet the rehabilitation goal agreed on by their counselor and themselves. The following are a sampling of the comments:

"I do wish that when I originally started the program that my career goals had been more closely screened. I finished a degree in Professional Aeronautics and have been unable to find suitable employment. When visiting with the job placement specialist I was told that I would never find a job and basically wasted time and money. I have since had to decide on another career path – I feel that if I had been screened a little more appropriately this could have been avoided!"

"Counselors initially handling case had a 'one size fits all' attitude towards rehabilitation. Seemed to shuffle majority of his clients into computer training. That is a 'hot' career field but it is ill-suited to kinesthetic/tactile learners."

"VA could improve by testing interest of person and testing aptitude, then matching these two for a training program. I did not finish my program because the counselor only wanted me to go into an area of training where I had no interest or background. This was a set up for failure."

"My disability was never taken into consideration. Jobs and job leads were not realistic. I have a disability with my right leg and no job lead gave this any consideration. I retired from a job driving a fork lift because it was too stressful on my leg. I was given a job lead driving a fork lift in and out of a freezer and lifting 50 pound loads by hand. I am 55 years old with a bad knee and I have not had one suitable job offer from this program."

Summary

It is clear from the large volume of verbatims for this phase, clustered around four specific issues, that many veterans are frustrated and disappointed by the service provided during this phase of the program. This is also validated by the specific overall satisfaction question on the survey: just over half (52.1 percent) stated they were very or somewhat satisfied with the employment services provided during the job ready phase. In general, the verbatims show that many veterans feel counselors need to show a more caring and compassionate attitude toward them, and make an effort to truly understand their individual needs and aspirations. They also expect counselors to be more accessible and to have more interaction with them during the search for employment.

Many have the expectation that the program will see them through to successful employment by providing contacts and job opportunities specifically for disabled veterans, instead of releasing them to conduct a search independently after their schooling is finished. These expectations may well be unrealistic, but in any case veterans should be told exactly what to expect at the beginning of the program to prevent these kinds of disappointments. From the comments provided it seems there is great inconsistency among different counselors in just how much job search help is provided, some received excellent referrals and help with resume preparation and interview skills, but many others reported receiving no help at all or not even being aware they were eligible for job search help.

Also, a significant number of veterans wrote in to suggest changes to the program regulations and an increase in the amount of subsistence provided, because the current program structure is not adequately meeting their needs. In fact, the survey asks those respondents who have withdrawn from the program their reasons for doing so, and some of the major reasons were medical problems (23.2 percent of those who voluntarily withdrew), financial difficulties (23.2 percent), and family responsibilities/difficulties (25.3 percent). While there is little the VR&E program can do about these issues in the short-term, these verbatims will hopefully provoke serious thought about policy changes to ensure the long-term success of the program.

Finally, and perhaps the most important issue of all, is that almost 10 percent of the respondents who submitted additional comments expressed their unhappiness with the career goal itself. This is an area that has a tremendous impact on veterans' satisfaction with the entire program as well as the success of their rehabilitation. If buy-in to the rehabilitation plan is not established at the beginning and maintained throughout the training and job search phases, a successful outcome is extremely unlikely, no matter how much the quality in other service areas improves.